



Foraging catnip



# 1 Getting Started

The world is full of useful plants—many of them rare, exotic, and obscure. This book, however, begins in the most familiar of places: your own backyard! In these pages, we'll explore ten common plants, some of which you may already know. These common backyard weeds form the backbone of kitchen herbalism. They are easy to find, easy to use, and have a variety of gifts to share with those who know how to use them.

In this chapter, we'll lay the foundation that every budding herbalist needs before diving in and working with the plants and recipes found later in the book.

Do you know a ray floret from a rhizome, or a leaflet from a lenticel? Don't fret! We'll explain these and other plant terms, and before you know it you'll be talking like a

botanist. We'll also assemble our foraging and remedy-making tool kits and introduce the types of remedies you'll be crafting later in the book. And for those with an interest in foraging (picking your own herbs out in the wild), we'll lay out the basics for a fun, safe foraging outing so you can hit the trail and fill your basket with confidence.

# Eat Your Weeds

What plants are growing in your backyard? I find that the plants that show up in our lives are often just what our bodies need. Identify the “weeds” that grow around your home, and then learn more about them. Even if you don’t find the plants in this book in your neighborhood, learn about the wild plants that are abundant where you live. There might be edibles among them!

Some of the recipes in this book are for snacks, drinks, and other treats. Making “weeds” a part of your everyday diet might seem weird at first. But when you taste a dandelion fritter or add chickweed to your salad, you’ll soon see why it’s worth trying. Eating these wild plants is a simple way to get to know their flavors and the habitats and seasons in which they grow.

Of course, not all plants (or all plant parts) are safe to consume, so *always* do your homework before ingesting plants not listed as edible in the pages that follow. To do otherwise would be dangerous or even deadly.



**Sandwiches made with giant chickweed**

## Be Patient

Some herbs bring comfort and relief in a flash. Like a racing rabbit, they work fast and strong from the start to bring comfort in a hurry. A pinch of yarrow styptic powder on a cut, for example, stops bleeding and can reduce pain right away!

Other herbs are more like a tortoise, moving us slowly but steadily toward better health. These herbs won’t seem to make a difference in the short term. But if you use them for a time, they can yield wonderful results. Think of these herbs like exercise or healthy eating. Make a habit of them, and your body will thank you!

Don’t give up on these slow-but-steady tortoise recipes! Give them the time they need to generate positive changes. They are certainly worth the wait.

## Follow Your Intuition

Making and using the recipes in this book is one part art, one part science, and one part intuition. Listen to your heart when selecting herbs and remedies for yourself and your family. If a plant is calling to you, learn about it. Do some research and find out what the herb has to offer and how to safely use it. Children often have a gift for this heart-led, instinctive understanding.



### Resting in the chickweed

From my young daughter requesting pine needle tea when she had a cough to my teenage son asking if plantain was useful for earaches, they understand things they have never been taught. You have this same intuition!

Of course, our intuition cannot stand alone. It must always be followed by careful and thorough research to ensure safe use of our herbal friends. Nonetheless, it's a delightful place to begin.

Intuition is not just for plants that your body says "yes!" to. It's also for plants to which your body says "no!" Children in particular seem to know what their bodies need, a wisdom worth nurturing.

# The Energy of Herbs

Warm, cool, damp, dry: these are some of the words herbalists use to describe the energetics of herbs and conditions.

If the notion of an herb being “cool” or “warm” seems a bit abstract, here’s a little game to make it clear. Close your eyes and imagine sinking your teeth into a fresh, juicy cucumber. Cool? Damp? Indeed! Now imagine biting into a spicy chili pepper or chunk of raw gingerroot. So hot! While these are dramatic examples, this is the heart of herbal energetics.

People, too, tend toward warm or cool. We all know someone who always seems cold—wearing sweaters in summer and piling the bed with down blankets all year long. This is a cool



**Chili peppers**

constitution. Others are the opposite, favoring icy beverages and wearing short sleeves and sandals year-round. Being aware of our bodies can be helpful when choosing herbs to suit our specific needs.



**Foraging bee balm and mullein**

## Foraging

While you can buy or plant the herbs in this book, foraging is a wonderful way to source them as well. If you want to try foraging, you can begin with a single, familiar plant, or set to work foraging all the species outlined in the following chapters. No need to go it alone . . . parents and kids make the best foraging teams!

For my kids and me, foraging is like a living treasure hunt. We find our baskets, pull on our boots, and then set out to see what is in season. Sometimes we come home with just what we were looking for, but most often, Mother Nature surprises us with treasures we never expected.

One of my favorite herbs to forage is nettle. After a long, cold winter, I can hardly wait to get outside in early spring and fill my basket with the deep-green shoots! I also love to pick wild peppermint, which grows in abundance near the creek at the edge of our farm. It’s one plant I always smell before I see, adding an element of surprise to this never-planned-but-always-welcome excuse to forage.

When gathering herbs, always pick on a dry day, after the morning dew has evaporated. If it has been raining, wait to harvest until the leaves and flowers have dried completely. This will prevent your hard work from going



**Oyster mushrooms**

to waste, as wet herbs and flowers are quick to spoil.

Gather leaves in cloth shopping bags or tightly woven baskets. If desired, use plastic bags inside of your basket or tote to keep plants separated by species. Back home, empty your harvest on a table or countertop. Depending on what you picked, this may be messy work! You might need to work on a picnic table or outdoors on a deck or porch. Just be sure to be out of the wind if your plants are lightweight.



**Basket of wild mulberries**



## Foraging family

### Foraging Basics

Ready to get started? Wait! There are a few things to know before you grab your basket and head for the woods. If you choose to forage some or all of the herbs for your recipes, always follow these simple guidelines to protect yourself, the plants, and the earth.

#### Be smart:

*Prepare for your time in the woods before you head outside!*

- Educate yourself before you set out to forage. Know how to positively identify the plants you are foraging and be absolutely certain of any dangerous lookalikes.

- Know your local toxic plants. Be on the lookout for poison ivy, poison oak, wild parsnip, and other potentially harmful plants found in your region.
- Wear appropriate clothing for your climate and apply mosquito and tick repellents and sun protection if needed. Throw a water bottle, raincoat, sweatshirt, and first aid kit in your bag . . . just in case.

**Be safe:**

*Your safety is your first priority. Stay healthy by following the steps below.*

- Never taste-test plants to determine their identity.
- Do not forage near busy roads; choose only plants growing a minimum of 50 feet from a roadway. Always harvest away from sprayed lawns and fields and areas that may contain pet waste.
- Never harvest a plant unless you are 100 percent certain of its identity.
- Always check with your adult if you have questions about the identity of a plant you have found.

**Be respectful:**

*Respect landowners, plants, and the earth.*

- Always get permission before you harvest from land that does not belong to you. The



**Foraging elderberries**

question, “May I please pick some of your weeds?” is a fast way to make friends and share your love of wildcrafting with others.

- Follow the 10:1 rule. For every ten specimens of a plant you find, you are welcome to harvest one. This leaves plenty of flowers for the bees and food for wildlife, and ensures the plant can set seed for its continued survival. If you find

less than ten of any plant in an area, as tempting as it is, there aren’t enough to pick. Check back again next season!

- Leave your foraging site better than you found it. Bag and toss any litter that you find while you are foraging. It’s a small way of saying thank you to the fields and forests for all they provide.

# “Leaflets three—let it be”



**Poison ivy**

The best protection against poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) is to simply stay on the lookout! Know how to identify poison ivy from a distance and keep your eyes open for it in the places where you explore.

Poison ivy is spread by contact with the oils found in the plant's leaves, stems, and roots. Contrary to popular belief, the fluid from a weeping sore does not spread the rash.

To identify poison ivy, look closely—but don't touch!

Never burn poison ivy. The troublesome oils become airborne and can cause serious, even life-threatening, health problems.

**Habitat:** Poison ivy is common in areas like roadsides, trailsides, parks, and campgrounds. In other words: places that people love to go!

**Leaves:** Each poison ivy leaf is composed of three leaflets. Leaf edges can be smooth or notched. Where the leaflets join together the stems are often red or pink, though not always. Leaves are attached alternately along the stem (though I don't encourage getting close enough to check). Leaves are usually shiny. In autumn, poison ivy turns scarlet red.

**Stems:** Poison ivy stems are thornless. While raspberries

also have leaves comprised of three leaflets each, their stems bear thorns.

**Growth habit:** Poison ivy plants readily ramble and spread across the ground. If supported by tall grasses, brush, or trees, poison ivy is an accomplished climber as well, traveling high off the ground.

If you stumble into a patch of poison ivy, freeze and back out slowly the way you came in. To remove the oil from your skin, clean off as you would if you had motor oil or vegetable oil on your skin—by firmly wiping with a clean, dry cloth or paper towel. Never reuse the towel, as the oil will then spread to other parts of the body. Then wash skin well with soap and water, and dry with a clean towel. Wash clothing, tools, and shoes in hot water, being careful not to touch them with bare hands.

## Foraging Tools

No special tools are needed to get started with foraging, but there are a few items that might help you in the field.

**Harvest bags or baskets:** A proper gathering bag is the key to an easy, relaxing harvest. Choose sturdy cotton shopping bags or, if you prefer, a tightly woven wicker basket. If desired, place a few plastic bags inside your basket or tote to keep plants from wilting on hot summer days.

Avoid gathering into plastic bags alone, as they tend to tear down the side. Also avoid any baskets with holes or gaps that may let plants fall out.

**Shovel:** A small trowel or, better yet, a sturdy garden shovel is a must for digging roots in the backyard, garden, and field. (Leave it at home if you're hiking, unless you're setting out specifically for roots.) Use your shovel for transplanting helpful "weeds" to more landscaping-friendly locations and for digging roots, such as burdock, ramps, or dandelions.

**Sharp tools:** A parent may need to assist you with branch cutters or a pocketknife. For example, pine and similar tree species may require a handheld pruner. However, most plants and this book can be harvested by hand, with at most a little help from a pair of scissors or a small knife.



Foraged mullein



Foraged wild apples



**Don't forget your boots!**

**Protective clothing:** If you're heading out for nettles, blackberries, or wild roses, protective clothing is a good idea! Choose sturdy fabrics to cover exposed skin and protect you from briars and brambles.

**Closed-toed shoes:** When you're out foraging it's wise to protect your feet. You'll likely go off the trail where poison ivy, stumps, brambles, and rocks await.

**Garden gloves:** When digging roots or harvesting nettle leaves, garden gloves are nice to have.

**Insect repellent:** If you live in a tick-prone region, apply natural insect repellent before you head out to the fields or forests (even in spring and fall, when the mosquitoes aren't out). You can also tuck in your shirt and tuck your pants into your socks to keep ticks out. Choose light-colored clothing and wear a hat to further protect yourself from biting insects.

# Clean, Wilt, Dry, Garble, and Store

Once your basket is full of wild, foraged treasures, what's next? It's simple, really. Just follow these steps to prepare your herbs for use in the recipes later in the book!

## Clean

Pick over your harvest, removing stray bits of grass, dirt, insects, and leaves

that found their way in. Discard any wet or dirty leaves, keeping an eye out for bird droppings, cocoons, or insect eggs.

Wash roots thoroughly to remove soil and grit, and then rinse well under cold, running water. However, if you are foraging flowers or leaves to use

for making remedies, do not wash your harvest! Washing introduces too much moisture and all but guarantees the spoilage of your harvest before it has a chance to be used.

When you are satisfied that your harvest is thoroughly picked over, it's time to wilt or dry your herbs!



Washing yellow dock roots



Wilting nettle



Dried bee balm leaf and flower

## Wilt

If you will be using your herbs fresh, you need to wilt the leaves and flowers. It's best to do this a day before proceeding with your recipe. Wilting removes excess moisture and extends the shelf life of your finished recipe.

To wilt, simply spread your plant out in a single layer, with little or no overlapping petals or leaves, on a cookie sheet, cooling rack, or table. Set everything in a shady spot to wilt (out of direct sunlight). Due to gusts of wind, it's best to wilt inside or on an enclosed porch.

## Dry

Dried herbs can be stored for up to twelve months for use in teas, infusions, and decoctions. The plants must be first prepared by picking over for interlopers, such as pebbles and grass (as described on page 25). Roots can be washed well, patted dry, and then sliced or chopped.

The best method for drying herbs varies by climate. If you live in an area with warm, dry air, you can dry your herbs just like you would wilt them. Simply spread your plants out in a single layer on a cooling rack placed over a cookie sheet, and then place in an out-of-the way spot to dry. (If drying your herbs outside, be sure it is not a windy day, as you could lose your



Drying dandelion and dock

herbs in a gust of wind!) How long your herbs take to dry depends both on the weather and on how moist your herbs were when harvested. Check them every few hours by pinching a leaf. When it crumbles easily between your fingers and thicker parts, such as stems or leaf veins, are also crisp, they're dry!

Herbs can also be tied into a brown paper bag and hung to dry, indoors or out. Fill the bag loosely with herbs, tie closed with kitchen twine, and hang until dry. Finally, herbs with long stems can be tied in small bundles and hung to dry from the rafters or a drying rack. Check them as described above to determine when they are thoroughly dry.

If you live in a humid or cool climate, lay your plants out in a single layer on a cooling rack over a cookie sheet. With the help of an adult, set the tray in an oven on very low heat (100–120°F). If possible crack your oven door open with a folded hot pad to allow moisture to escape and encourage drying. Dry herbs until crisp, without a hint of moisture left in the plants. Most herbs will be dry in four to twelve hours.

If you are lucky enough to own a dehydrator, by all means use that! These machines dry more herbs more quickly and evenly than an oven.



**Dried nettle leaf**

Some plants (those in the mint family, in particular) are quick to reabsorb moisture after drying. To ensure the quality of your harvest, put your herbs in jars as soon as possible after drying, and never store herbs that are not thoroughly dry. Discard any herbs that develop mold.

### **Garble**

“Garble” is a funny word for a useful task: picking over our dried plants and

separating the parts we want to keep from the parts we don’t. We often garble to remove unwanted stems and seedheads.

Garbling is most easily done in a large, wide mixing bowl, providing room for more than one set of hands. It’s a wonderful and satisfying job.

### **Store**

Transfer your crisp, dried herbs to clean, dry mason jars. Lid your jars and

label with the plant type and date of harvest. Do not label with sticky notes, as they easily drop off the jars. Use a permanent marker to make sure you can read your labels later in the year.

Store your jars of dried herbs in a dark cabinet or cupboard, away from heat and moisture. Dried herbs should be used within one year.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The common names of plants can differ by region, country, or culture. One plant could have ten or more of these nicknames! To further complicate things, names are sometimes shared between plants of different species. All of this can make discussing plants quite confusing.

Latin names to the rescue! These old-fashioned, scientific-sounding names are used by scientists, herbalists, and botanists. Each plant has one (and only one!) Latin name, and it is almost always in italics. We'll share them with you for the plants in the coming chapters. You don't need to use them when discussing plants, but it's handy to be familiar with them to clarify confusion when discussing plants with other herbal enthusiasts.



**Strawberry**  
*Fragaria ananassa*

# The Parts of Plants

In the vegetable garden, it's no surprise that different plants offer different useful parts. We harvest leaves (lettuce and cabbage), shoots and stalks (asparagus and rhubarb), roots (carrots and beets), fruits (tomatoes and strawberries), and more. And while some garden plants offer multiple edible parts (pea shoots and pea pods, or beet roots and beet greens, for example), others offer only one edible part.

It is much the same for herbs. Some plants offer fruit and flowers, others offer leaves and seeds, and others only roots or seeds or bark. What is useful varies by species, just as it does in the vegetable patch.

In the chapters that follow, we'll discover which parts of each plant are useful, focusing on leaves, flowers, fruits, seeds, bark, and roots. Pay attention to these plant parts and remember: just because one part of a plant is healthy and useful doesn't mean that all parts are! Just as eating the wrong part of a garden plant could make you very sick, the same is true for these plants. One of my favorite plants in this book, elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*), has edible berries and flowers. However, the leaves and branches are toxic if eaten.



## Elderflower infusion

- **NOTE:** Only use the plant parts
- recommended. And never substitute
- or experiment with parts you
- haven't thoroughly researched—
- it can be dangerous!



## Plant Terms to Know

The following terms will help transform you into a budding botanist. (They'll come up in the plant descriptions and recipes later in the book and are here for you to reference.)

**Aerial parts:** above-ground portions of a plant

**Alternate:** leaves arranged singularly along the stem, with one emerging on one side and another emerging on the other side farther up the branch

**Basal rosette:** a ring or whorl of leaves emerging directly from the ground

**Biennial:** a plant with a two-year life cycle, normally growing only leaves above ground the first year, and setting flowers the next

**Composite:** a member of the daisy family, featuring a compound flower head

**Compound:** made up of more than one part

- **NOTE:** A compound leaf
- is comprised of several
- leaflets arranged along a
- single stem, versus a "simple"
- leaf, such as an oak or

- elm leaf, made of a single
- part. A compound flower is
- comprised of many smaller
- flowers clustered together in
- a single flower head.

**Disc florets:** small, tubular florets lacking petals that form the central portion of most composite flowers

**Distal:** the far end of a branch or leaf

**Fascicle:** a bundle or cluster of needles, specific to pine species

**Floret:** a tiny flower that makes up a small part of a larger flower, as in a sunflower or dandelion

**Herbaceous:** lacking a hard, woody stem

**Leaflet:** a small leaf-like structure that forms a part of a compound leaf

**Lenticels:** raised pores found on the stem of a woody plant, which act as "breathing" ports and allow for the exchange of gases between the plant and the atmosphere

**Midrib:** a sturdy vein running down the center of a leaf

**Opposite:** leaves arranged in pairs along the stem



**Palmate**

**Palmate:** a lobed leaf with midribs that all radiate from one point, like fingers radiating out of a palm

**Pinnate:** a lobed leaf with leaflets or lobes arranged on the stem in pairs along a central midrib

**Pistil:** the female organs of a flower, from which seeds develop

**Pith:** a soft, spongy, normally tan or white tissue found inside the stems of some species

**Ray florets:** small florets normally bearing a single elongated petal each that comprise the outer ring of many composite flowers (daisy and sunflower, for example)

• **NOTE:** Some species bear  
 • flowers comprised entirely  
 • of ray florets.

**Rhizomes:** roots that spread horizontally under the surface of the soil, often sending up shoots at intervals along its length



**Rosette**

**Rosette:** a cluster of over-lapping leaves arranged in a rose-like fashion, often found growing directly on the ground

**Serrated:** toothed or jagged edge

**Stamen:** the male organ of a flower, from which pollen arises

**Stem:** the main part or body of a plant, emerging from the roots and bearing the other plant parts (leaves, branches, etc.)

**Taproot:** a long, relatively straight main root growing downward into the earth from a plant

**Umbel:** an umbrella-shaped cluster of flowers or berries

# Types of Plant Remedies



**Calendula salve**



**Peppermint tea**



**White pine syrup**

Many herbal remedies are simply plant-based treatments for injury or illness. Making a remedy can be as simple as chewing up a fresh leaf and putting the resulting green mash onto a bee sting. (Really! We'll make some later on in the book.) But remedies can also be much more elegant and complex than that.

Also, keep in mind that most recipes in the chapters that follow can be varied to your liking. Change them to suit your taste or the herbs you have available. If you find that an infused vinegar is hard for you to swallow, add honey and enjoy it as an oxymel

(vinegar-honey syrup) instead. These are *your* recipes after all. You can use them exactly as written or customize to your heart's content! The choice is up to you. Here are some remedies we will explore.

**Poultice:** Mashed herbs applied directly to the skin—either chewed or crushed with a mortar and pestle—are called a poultice. A poultice allows the herbal juices to go to work directly on the problem area. While they aren't pretty, they are quick, effective, and easy to make.

**Infusion:** If you've ever made a cup of tea, you've made an infusion. Infusions

are herbs steeped in water, oil, or vinegar, which are then either drunk or applied to the skin. Infusion times vary widely, depending on what you're making. It can be as little as a few minutes for an herbal tea, to overnight for a strong herbal infusion, or as long as several weeks or even months for an infused oil.

**Decoction:** A decoction is similar to an infusion, but made of the sturdier parts of a plant, such as seeds, bark, and roots. Extraction takes longer for these more stubborn plant materials, so we normally simmer a decoction until the liquid is reduced by half.



**Bee balm oxymel**

**Syrup:** Syrups are easy to make and delicious to take! They are crafted from either honey and fresh herbs or honey and a decoction of dried herbs in water. Syrups can be enjoyed in teas, on pancakes, or straight off of the spoon, depending on the herbs and intended uses.

**Glycerite:** Made with glycerin and water, glycerites are sweet, mild formulas that are especially suited for kids.

**Oxymel:** Oxymels are made with a combination of raw apple cider vinegar and honey. They can be quite delicious on their own and they make a fine base for salad dressings as well.

**Salve:** Herbal salves (also called balms) are made from herb-infused oils. By simply adding beeswax to the strained oil, a smooth, easy-to-use balm results.

### Amber glass dropper bottles



Wooden spoon filled with nettle

## Useful Tools and Equipment for Remedies

**Stainless steel pots:** “Non-reactive” pots or pans (not made of aluminum or cast iron and without a nonstick coating) are required for any stovetop remedy making. If you don’t have stainless steel, glass or unchipped enamel pots are good choices as well.

**Steel or wooden spoons:** Use a stainless steel spoon, or a wooden spoon you don’t mind staining, when stirring these recipes. Avoid using plastic, as it may leach chemicals.

**Measuring cups and spoons:** Again, stainless steel or glass are best, but use what you have. Plastic tools may be discolored by some ingredients.

**Glass jars:** Mason jars are very useful and we’ll rely on them in many recipes. If you don’t already have a stash of glass jars in the basement or pantry, they are easy to find second-hand or at your local grocery, hardware, or department store. If you are reusing jam, nut butter, or pickle jars, make sure that they are completely clean

and free of odors and have a tight-fitting lid. Stock up on a variety of sizes from quarter-pint to quart for the recipes that follow.

**Glass dropper bottles:** Glass dropper bottles are nice for storing some of the recipes in this book, although they aren’t necessary. If you would like to use dropper bottles for your finished formulas, you can purchase them at some natural foods stores, or online through the sources listed in the resources section (see page 171).



### Aprons protect clothing from stains

Choose amber or cobalt if possible, as these dark bottles are better at keeping sunlight out than clear bottles and extend the useful life of your remedies.

**Plastic or nonreactive lids:** Many of these recipes require a plastic or other non-metal lid. If you don't have a plastic lid, you can line a regular

mason jar lid with waxed paper, parchment, or a plastic sandwich bag instead.

**Glass measuring pitcher:** A glass or steel measuring pitcher is useful for pouring balms and oils. They come in a variety of sizes, but a two-cup measure will work for most of these recipes.

**Apron:** When you are working with oils and herbs, an apron will keep you clean! Protect your clothes by donning one before you get to work.